



## Deconstructing Material Commodification: A Feminist Critique of Objectification in Qaisra Shahraz's Holy Woman

Omera Saeed<sup>1</sup>, Aneela Ilyas<sup>2</sup>, Shiza Zulfiqar<sup>3</sup>, Muhammad Ajmal <sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Ph.D. Scholar/Lecturer, Department of English, Times Institute, Multan, Punjab, Pakistan. Email: omera1@t.edu.pk

<sup>2</sup> Ph.D. Scholar, Department of English, Times Institute, Multan, Punjab, Pakistan. Email: 1stqurashi@gmail.com

<sup>3</sup> Lecturer, Department of English, Times Institute, Multan, Punjab, Pakistan. Email: shizazulfiqar3121996@gmail.com

<sup>4</sup> Associate Professor, Department of English Language and Literature, The Shaikh Ayaz University Shikarpur, Sindh, Pakistan. Email: muhammad.ajmal@saus.edu.pk

### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article History:

Received: December 19, 2023

Revised: March 20, 2024

Accepted: March 22, 2024

Available Online: March 23, 2024

#### Keywords:

Feminism

Othring

Discourse Analysis

Materialism

Religion

Women

Marginalization

#### Funding:

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

### ABSTRACT

The main concern of present study is to analyze Qaisra Shahraz's Holy Woman by applying feministic lens and Simon de Beauvoir's Second Sex Theoretical lens to discuss the materialistic commodification that influence the women individuality and identity as a woman. Using the objectification concept and feminist criticism, the study examines how the leading character Zarri Bano as targeted and objectified by her own. An examination of the material and /or trading concept of woman is then used through a detailed textual analysis to break down how various factors of sexualization, money, and femininity develop the women's realities, their identity, and the systems of opposition available to them. This research delves into the patriarchal power dynamics that objectify and silence women's voices, particularly focusing on the subjugation of female subalterns by patriarchal forces. It highlights how these power structures manipulate discourse to impose specific identities on women, such as Holy women, izzat, gairat, purdah, and burqa to serve patriarchal agendas rather than genuine religious principles. Through the lens of Simon de Beauvoir's feminist philosophy, this study examines the character of Zari Bano in Qaisra Shahraz's novel Holy Woman as a symbol of subalternity, revealing the oppression she faces not only from her father but also from societal discrimination based on gender. The analysis demonstrates how patriarchal societies justify the marginalization of women to advance their own political and economic interests.

© 2024 The Authors, Published by iRASD. This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution Non-Commercial License

Corresponding Author's Email: muhammad.ajmal@saus.edu.pk

## 1. Introduction

Qaisra Shahraz is a modern novelist who writes about the problems of today's world. Her works shed light on contemporary Pakistani culture and society. Through her portrayal of fundamental Muslim practices and beliefs, her fiction shed light on Islam and Muslim culture. She has taken them on a tour of four Muslim countries: Pakistan, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Malaysia to show them, the thriving Muslim world, its cultures, and rituals, like Hajj. She has written openly about her characters and shown them in all their glory. Her stories take place in contemporary Pakistan, but her characters transcend both their period and place of origin. All of the themes work together brilliantly. The novels both are captivating and fascinating. The author has handled the delicate subject matter with great finesse. Her writing flows easily, and she manages to pique the reader's interest at the same time (Shervani, 2011). Her works of fiction, such as A Pair of Jeans, are taught in a variety of educational settings, including schools and universities. A book with the working title The Holy and the Unholy is dedicated to a study of the author's body of work. Qaisra Shahraz is a contemporary novelist who writes on topics that are relevant to contemporary culture. Her works provide a window into the lives of people living in modern-day Pakistan by illuminating the culture and customs of those people. Her

novels provide an insight of Islam and Muslim society due to the fact that she has conveyed the fundamental beliefs of Muslims as well as the principles of Islam throughout her writing. She took them on a trip to four different Muslim nations — Pakistan, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Malaysia — so that they could learn about "the dynamic Muslim world, its cultures and rituals, like Hajj, etc." 1 She has depicted her characters in a clear and unambiguous manner when writing her work, which she has done without any reservations. The contemporary country of Pakistan serves as the backdrop for her novels, yet the plot and characters of her books defy the constraints of both time and the places in which they are situated. The various concepts are intertwined in such a seamless manner. Both of the books are exceptionally captivating and will keep you interested until the very end. The author has dealt with some of the most delicate subject matter in the most understated way possible. She writes in a way that is easy to follow, and at the same time, she manages to pique the interest of the reader. The insight into the life of each individual brings to life the society that she has painted in her works. The rural landscapes in which her story is set help us to comprehend the complexities of daily life in Pakistani villages and the close-knit social structures that exist there. Despite the fact that the majority of her stories take place in rural settings, her characters have a worldwide appeal since they experience universal emotions such as love, anguish, sorrow, pain, and tolerance. The readers are able to accurately identify human feelings, and it is natural to feel both joy and grief alongside the characters in a book. Both *The Holy Lady* and *the Typhoon*, which are books written by Qaisra Shahraz, take place in the rural areas of Pakistan.

Gender prejudices are more common in writing than elsewhere. The writings serve as the foundation around which myths about men and women are built, myths that are then ritually enacted over and over again. Feminist critics, in Hans Bertan's opinion, demonstrate how frequently literary depictions of women replicate the usual societal clichés of a woman as an immoral and dangerous seductress (Haleem, 2014). This reality may manifest itself in the form of particular social pursuits, political endeavours, or even cultural productions such as philosophy, art, music, sculpture, and the literary arts. The perspective of genetic structuralism considers literary production to be the human fact. There is a lot of overlap between human behaviour and human fact. According to Goldman, the term "human fact" refers to all of the verbal and physical acts and behaviours of humans that science attempts to comprehend. It can refer to activities that take place in a group setting or on an individual basis and can include things like literary works, works of art, musical compositions, and paintings. The researcher comes to the conclusion that the novel *The Holy Lady* by Qaisara Shahraz is based on human fact. The focus is on the society of Pakistan. There are a number of occurrences, forms of social behavior, and cultural practices that make up Pakistani society. These points are made very evident throughout the entirety of the novel *The Holy Woman*. In addition, these outcomes of human activity won't materialize if there isn't any supporting item in the picture (Yulianti, 2018). A stunning young woman (Zarri Bano) from rural Pakistan in the present day is the centerpiece of *The Holy Woman*. Because of unforeseen circumstances, Zarri Bano is pushed into (though "coerced" may be too severe a term) becoming a holy woman, forbidden to marry, and expected to devote her life to Islam. The everyday activities of Zarri Bano, her family, and the villages around them are chronicled in this book. Despite the central figure, a holy woman, being obligated to stay celibate, the book is really about her and another man (Hassan, 2016).

### **1.1. Significance of the Study**

This study examines the sexual, material and mental objectification of women in a patriarchal society where the protagonist is still handicapped of her socio rights. This study is undersored as the researcher emphasizes women's emancipation from the clutches of socio-stereotypes that have objectified them.

### **1.2. Statement of the Problem**

This research is qualitative close reading of the novel which is about the resistance of women sexually & mentally by Qaisra Shahraz in *Holy Women* than men enjoy a privileged position in society whereas women are limited to their socio-designed structures to live under the patriarchal rules of no choice of one's own and push back from authority and leadership.

### **1.3. Objective of Research**

1. To introspects the protagonist defensive mechanism against material objectification

#### 1.4. Research Question

1. How the socio-scheme was designed for the protagonist's material objectification in the novel *Holy Woman*?

## 2. Literature Review

The *Second Sex* was first published in 1953, de Beauvoir presented questions that many men and women had not yet given serious consideration to "One wonders if women still exists" To illustrate the position of women in the world and to speculate on the influence of sexuality, she uses a variety of academic fields, including history, philosophy, economics, biology, and a host of others. In a period before the term feminist was even a phrase, let alone a movement, this is a remarkable piece of writing that was produced ("*Sex and gender in Simone de Beauvoir's Second Sex.*," 1998). The focus on women's domestic lives is what sets the novels by Sidhwa and Shahraz apart from the other options and makes them the best fit for this study. The centrality of the female body in the novel's protagonists' fight for independence is indicative of the novel's commitment to realism. Both Sidhwa and Shahraz's female characters experience sexual, physical, and mental violence at the hands of their male counterparts. Both authors place their female protagonists in a position of defiance in opposition to culturally established standards that seek to regulate women's bodies and treat them as sexual objects to be admired by men. In a society where males decide on women's status, roles, clothing, and behavior at the national and household levels, their work reflects a masculine fascination with the female body. Because of this shared ground, a feminist interpretation of Sidhwa's and Shahraz's fiction can be made in contrast to Pakistan's prevailing patriarchal culture. ("*Hiding and Seeking Identity: The Female Figure in the Novels of Pakistani Female Writers in English.*" 2013). A Pakistani author who writes in English, Qaisra Shahraz has produced works that focus on the fight that women wage against the patriarchal institutions and customs that exist in society. In her book, "*The Holy Lady.*" she tells the narrative of a contemporary feudal family that has relocated from its original village in Rural Sindh to a city nearby. This family is now living in the metropolis. The patriarch of the family, Habib Khan, nonetheless maintains a feudal attitude despite the family's noticeable progress towards more contemporary ways of life. After the death of his only son, he orders his eldest daughter, Zari Bano, to wed Holy Quran and become his heiress so that he can maintain his land and property in the family. This is done so that his legacy will continue. Women are typically the ones to bear the brunt of the negative effects of living in a society that is dominated by men. The conflict that exists between male and female members of society is addressed in the story, which focuses on masculine superiority (Arafath, 2014).

Postcolonialism is a phrase that is commonly used to refer to the portrayal of race, ethnicity, culture, and human identity in the contemporary era, namely following the independence of a huge number of formerly occupied countries. From the time of colonization until the 21st century, it has been related to imperialism. The term postcolonial literature refers to the written works and works of art that were produced in countries that gained their independence after being colonized, such as India, Sri Lanka, Nigeria, Senegal, and Australia. The influential book *Orientalism* by Edward Said is an analysis of how the Western world portrays the cultures of the East, and it falls under the umbrella of Postcolonial Studies. Because they are both members of the Commonwealth of Nations, Canada, and Australia are frequently referred to as settler countries (Talib, 2002). According to Homi Bhabha and published in Greenblatt and Gun's *Redrawing the Boundaries*, Bhabha discusses the complicated problem of representation and meaning. The use of culture as a means of subsistence is simultaneously international and translational. It is transnational because contemporary postcolonial discourses are rooted in specific histories of cultural displacement.

Culture is symbolic because the question of how culture signifies, or what is signified by culture, is a rather complex issue. Such spatial histories of displacement, now accompanied by the territorial ambitions of global media technologies, make the question of how culture signifies rather complex. This distinction is important because it allows one to better understand the cultural contexts in which these symbols are used. The transnational aspect of cultural change includes migration and diaspora, which refers to cultures that have been dispersed throughout the world. For example, Egyptians may move to Jersey; they do not consider themselves to be Americans, but they are unable to return to Egypt. They do not have any Egyptian or American ancestry. Indian psyche, indigenous ways of life, and similar things like that (Sibanda & Young, 2020). women have a subaltern status in nations like Pakistan, but

educated and wealthy women like Zarri serve as an example for other women to learn from so that they might improve their own lives. According to her, Zarri transforms herself into a "holy lady" to defy this tradition and satisfy its prerequisites, but in the end, she is successful in dispelling the myth that underpins the tradition (Khan, 2019). Constructing a picture of Zarri Bano as a devout woman. She concludes that in this androcentric world, the self-assumed superior race of man has squandered millennia of history demonstrating the inadequacies of women. She discusses the many varying roles and responsibilities that have been assigned to women throughout history. She attributes the beginning of the practice of having a holy woman to the fact that the girls were used for financial and political gain or disposing of them in the direction of the religion as extra members, (Khan, 2019).

### **3. Research Methodology**

Research is descriptive and analytical on the grounds of feministic perspective applied on text. When it comes to interpreting and describing the Textual analysis approach, critical assessments, articles that are pertinent to the topic, and other works are all extremely beneficial. Text has the ability to impart knowledge as well as change our concepts. This theory is quite convenient in evaluating the objectification of women being crushed as a weak creature and developing imageries alongside the significant role of Zari Bano.

#### **3.1. Data Analysis**

Qaisra Shahraz's *Holy Women* has been examined from the perspective of first wave of feminism by the critical lens of Simon de Beauvoir's *Second Sex*. Among the earliest works to take on the subject of human history from a feminist point of view is *The Second Sex*. There were those who praised de Beauvoir, but there were also many who attacked her. This voluminous and painstakingly researched masterpiece is now widely recognised as a cornerstone of not only feminist philosophy but also the broader philosophical discourse of the 20th century. According to De Beauvoir, one of the key ways in which males oppress women is by consistently framing them in opposition to men as the Other. A man is the subject, while a woman plays the part of the other, or object. He transcends and constitutes the very core of reality. She's useless, unfinished, and hacked up. He goes out into the world and dominates it, while women are relegated to the inside. She sits passively, hoping that he will do something to rescue her. All of de Beauvoir's later arguments hinge on this distinction. De Beauvoir argues that, while it is human nature to try to figure out who we are in relation to others, doing so in terms of the sexes is wrong. When a man limits a woman's identity to that of "Other," he basically denies her humanity. In *The Second Sex*, de Beauvoir explains her quest to discover the origin of the sex gap. In the first book, "Facts and Myths," she explores the question of how "female beings" have come to be viewed as second-class citizens.

De Beauvoir looks to biology, psychoanalysis, and historical materialism for clues to this topic and to help her better comprehend her own identity. These studies do indeed provide light on the "fundamental" differences between men and women, but they in no way constitute an excuse for women's subordination. Everyone just accepts women's inferior "destiny" as a given. From ancient nomads to the French Revolution and beyond, he traces the development of masculine superiority throughout history. Once again, she encounters several instances of female subordination without any particularly convincing rationale. She contends that history is not a fixed "truth," but rather a mirror that reflects prevailing worldviews and inequities. De Beauvoir then moves on to a discussion of the many legendary depictions of women and how they have left an indelible mark on the collective unconscious, frequently to the detriment of women. As De Beauvoir sees it, the myth of the "eternal feminine" has its roots in men's uneasiness with the fact of their own birth, and she intends to dispel this reluctance by doing so. Motherhood has been revered and demonised throughout history because of its dual role in life and death. The lady becomes a symbol of "life" as a result of these unknown processes, but in doing so she loses her own identity. To demonstrate the widespread nature of these misconceptions, de Beauvoir analyses the representation of women in the works of five contemporary authors. In the conclusion of this section, de Beauvoir analyses how these misconceptions affect people's lives. She comes to the conclusion that biology, psychoanalysis, history, and literature all lend credence to the "eternal feminine" fantasy.

#### **4. Discussion**

This first concrete instance of the material objectification of women is encountered at the beginning of Chapter Two. It begins with Chaudharani Kaniz reflecting on a match for her son Khawar suggested by her sister Sabra. She wonders whether an educated middle-class girl would consent to settling down with her son in the village. Reminiscing about her own youth, she betrays her own material objectification of herself:

When she had been given the option of either marrying into an ordinary but very much an urban family or staying on in the village and marrying a very wealthy landlord, Kaniz without a moment's hesitation (Shahraz, 2001).

At that time, her own mother had presented Sarwar's wealth, power, and possessions as the acme of eligibility in a bachelor. This is soon followed by a conversation between Kaniz and Khawar where she tells him that it is too degrading for a landlord's son to be romantically involved with a washerwoman's daughter. This is a material objectification of women perpetrated by a woman. How far the elders of this village go in this direction is seen in Chapter Three when Zarri Bano's grandfather Baba Siraj Din is scandalized to learn that, after her engagement to Sikandar, Zarri Bano will be staying at her fiancé's home for a visit: His words are significant as they establish a parity between land, wives, daughters, and honour. This is an insidious and indirect material objectification of women coming from an uncompromising feudal lord. Another example of such subtle objectification occurs when Sikandar informs Zarri Bano that, having enough of his own wealth, he is not interested in her father's. Notwithstanding his commendable attitude in this regard, the fact remains that, for many men, a prospective wife is to be seen as a potential source of material benefit.

More material objectification of women in the form of social snobbery is seen in Chapter Six after the death of Jafar. An incident where Kaniz is a mourning guest and Fatima is a serving maid at the bereaved household: She looked up, just as Fatima moved away, but not before she caught the triumphant look on her rival's face (Shahraz, 2001). Kaniz is chagrined to see Khawar standing behind Firdaus and Fatima being triumphant at seeing Kaniz disturbed. This tension between Kaniz and Fatima has a background in the past when Fatima was once a prospective wife for Kaniz's late husband Sarwar. But, this old rivalry is not effectively portrayed by the author. The potent factor lies in the socio-economic disparity between the two women. As such, all rancor between them seems to be a manifestation of the material objectification of women by women. The pivotal moment of the novel also occurs in this chapter in this fashion: Your father ... Shahzada swallowed, finding it hard to say the words, wants you to become his heiress, and our Shahzadi Ibadat, our Holy Woman, in the traditional way (Shahraz, 2001). Having lost his male heir, Habib is constrained by feudal tradition to designate his elder daughter as his heiress. Ostensibly, this status confers upon her immense power and wealth. But, this power and wealth are nothing but a golden cage for her and leave her a hapless victim to emotional deprivation and material objectification. The material objectification motif is manifested again when Habib tells Shahzada: I have lost a son, and I am not going to lose my inheritance to a complete stranger. I want you to support me in this (Shahraz, 2001). He reminds his wife that his is always happened in his family when a male heir died. However, the significant fact is that the female heir is completely denied any agency in the matter of leading a social or a conjugal life. He takes comfort in the fact that: "She will be the sole mistress of all this after my death" (Shahraz, 2001). This is also an indirect material objectification of Zarri Bano. At any given time in the novel, material considerations are never far below the surface as is evinced in these words of Shahzada to Fatima in Chapter Eight: You people of the lower caste envy us our wealth, but at this moment I would give anything to swap lives with you, or a woman living in a mud-baked hut (Shahraz, 2001). This is echoed in inverse when, in Chapter Twenty-four, Kulsoom the matchmaker demonstrates a material objectification of herself by admitting to being status conscious: "The last thing she wanted was to be caught washing by someone like Habib Khan" (Shahraz, 2001). Her astuteness in this regard is related thus:

the big people's company, and had for some time enjoyed the material benefits of ingratiating herself in their favour and remaining under their patronage (Shahraz, 2001).

In Chapter Forty-Five yet another of the many instances of Kaniz's degradation of Fatima on a social basis can be viewed from the angle of material objectification when she

thinks of Fatima: "She is in her rightful place now, performing menial duties in this household," (Shahraz, 2001). This happens when the Din family is in mourning again after the loss of Habib and Ruby. Two Chapters later, we see Kaniz remembering her own humiliation at the hands of Firdaus in the latter's office: "Does a *chaudharani* go on her knees to a mere slip of a girl?" (Shahraz, 2001). And in Chapter Fifty-One, Shahzada's bitter comment to Baba Siraj Din illustrates the extent to which the social and material objectification of women like her has been damaging to their sensibility. This is the last expression of the material objectification of women by men in this novel. It is, in fact, a succinct summing up of this thematic element in *The Holy Woman*.

**Table 1: Material Objectification**

Page	Content	Comment
24	would a middle-class, educated and citified Lahori woman relish coming to the quiet backwaters of a rural village in scorching Sind?	Chaudharani Kaniz is musing whether the match suggested for her son Khawar by her sister Sabra would be acceptable to the girl.
25	When she had been given the option of either marrying into an 'ordinary' but very much an urban family, or staying on in the village and marrying a very wealthy landlord, Kaniz without a moment's hesitation had plummeted for the honour of becoming a <i>zemindar's</i> wife. Becoming a <i>chaudharani</i> and reigning supreme as the headwoman in a close-knit village hierarchy With acres of land to his name and plenty of revenue coming from it, you and your husband Sarwar will never be short of anything, everyone knew and it was an undisputed fact that Shahzada was the first and most important local landowner.	Kaniz is thinking about her mother's exhortation and her own past choices.
27	Firdaus! The washerwoman's daughter!	Kaniz's thought on seeing her son Khawar speaking to Firdaus.
30	It is too degrading for a wealthy, well-born landlord to go chasing after a washerwoman's daughter. If I want to, I can marry that <i>chit</i> – that <i>washerwoman's daughter</i> and there is nothing you can do to stop me, Mother.	Conversation between Kaniz and Khawar. In this novel, Kaniz is the personification of material objectification where the attacker and victim are both women.
37	Alongside our land, our wives and daughters, our izzat – our honour – is the most precious thing in our lives. Even if you sacrifice, forget, or part with all the other etiquettes of our land-owning class of feudal landlords, we will never let you sully our <i>izzat</i> or our women's honour, Shahzada.	Baba Siraj Din voices his opinion to Shahzada about Zarri staying in Sikandar's house before being married to him. His bringing his daughter at a par with his land is a blatant material objectification of Zarri Bano.
51	It is not your wealth I care for. I have enough of my own to be able to comfortably compete with your father.	Here, Sikandar is ego-jockeying with Zarri during their courtship. The material objectification of a prospective wife is unmistakable.

## 5. Conclusion

Sexual objectification of the female body has clearly permeated our cultural milieu; it is likely to affect most girls and women, regardless of who their actual social contracts are. With particular reference to *The Holy Women*, it can be deduced that only some female characters like *chaudharani* Kaniz bear some amount of responsibility for their own predicament. This in no way diminishes the overarching phenomenon of men's role in this regard. Furthermore, the

onus of sexual objectification of women in the novel is to be borne by the role of the traditional patriarchal setup in the depicted society.

## References

- Arafath, Y. (2014). When Patriarchy Strikes: Exclusive Interview with Qaisra Shahraz.
- Haleem, S. (2014). Challenging Gender Stereotypes: A Text Analysis of Qaisra Shehraz's Novel *The Holy Woman*. *International Proceedings of Economics Development and Research*, 74(10), 56-61. doi: <https://doi.org/10.7763/IPEDR>. 2014. V74. 10
- Hassan, A. (2016, november 16). *The Holy Woman* by Qaisra Shahraz.
- Hihiding and Seeking Identity: The Female Figure in the Novels of Pakistani Female Writers in English. (2013). *Feminist Approach (Doctoral dissertation)*.
- Khan, H. (2019). A Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis of Qaisra Shahraz's *The Holy Woman* in the Backdrop of Subalternity. *International Journal of English Linguistics*, 9(5), 249-256. doi: <https://doi.org/10.5539/ijel.v9n5p249>
- Sex and gender in Simone de Beauvoir's *Second Sex*. (1998).
- Shahraz, Q. (2001). *The Holy Woman*: London: HarperCollins Publishers.
- Shervani, S. (2011). Qaisra shahraz: The novelist of the new era. *The holy and the unholy: Critical essays on Qaisra Shahraz's fiction*, 260-281.
- Sibanda, L., & Young, J. (2020). Towards a postcolonial curriculum in Zimbabwe: A critical review of the literature. *Africa Education Review*, 17(2), 50-72.
- Talib, I. S. (2002). *The language of postcolonial literatures: An introduction*: Psychology Press.
- Yulianti, P. (2018). *Author's View toward Pakistan Society in Qaisra SHAHRAZ'S The Holy Wowan*. Paper presented at the English Language and Literature International Conference (ELLiC) Proceedings.